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For it is characteristic of symbols that they are never entirely arbitrary.
Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics* 79

[The guest] finds no welcome, no lodging and no guarantee except in the house of the man with whom he is connected by *philótēs* [affection]. This bond is given visible expression in the *súmbolon*, the sign of recognition, which has the form of a broken ring, the matching halves of which were kept by the parties to the relationship.
Émile Benveniste, *Indo-European Language and Society* 278

1. Two Roads Diverged

- 1 After fifty long years of triumphant, authoritarian¹ liberalism in the academic, economic, and political fields, one may understandably be tempted to follow the venerable doctrine of Socialist orators of the late nineteenth century: *quote your opponents sparingly*. To a certain extent, this short essay demonstrates the difficulty of doing so. At times, the literary humanities resemble a culturalist, somewhat Byzantine version of authoritarian liberalism which, in turn, has given birth to several of the distinctive features of the contemporary university. The production of industrial quantities of academic commentary across disciplines, for one, as well as the dissociation from historical reality such an overproduction sometimes entails (and sometimes intends to consolidate), are both typical of the current formation of Western governance and one of its main structural necessities. As an academic style, this culturalist imaginary has its own string of familiar rituals—its Schumpeterian ethos of “creative destruction,”² its phraseology, its Foucauldian themes, its historical Adamism (and Adam Smithism).
- 2 In what follows, I will discuss gift-giving and gossiping in a canonical American novel (John Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath*, 1939) by way of the two texts which, for reasons I will try to make clear, sealed the fate of dominant literary scholarship after WWII: Marcel Mauss’s essay *The Gift*³ (1924/1925) and Claude Lévi-Strauss’s *Introduction to the*

*Work of Marcel Mauss*⁴ (1950). I argue that Steinbeck's use of nominally non-official discourse—such as hearsay, rumor, and gossip—outlines a threefold critique of capitalism, official discourse, and academic literary criticism. Gossiping is an example of non-capitalist gift-economy which depends on mutuality, trust, and anonymity. In turn, mutuality, trust, and anonymity outline a kind of literary criticism which would disrupt neither the value of informal discourse (hear-say, rumor, and gossip) for the disenfranchised, nor the value of gifting as a practical, non-capitalist economy. I use “official” in its etymological sense: “appropriate for service or ceremony,” “required by duty.” I argue that while gossip and rumor are types of informal discourse, they are simultaneously types of official discourse, despite their colloquial uses and connotations: they engage the fundamental moral categories of the disenfranchised and the power structures that seal their economic and political fate, and they do so in the form of recurring, defined social practices.

- 3 In *The Gift*, Mauss essentially provides a model for what could have been some of modern literary theory's greatest arguments in support of its political and educational value as an academic discipline. In his commentary on Mauss, on the other hand, Lévi-Strauss introduces what has become modern literary theory's inexhaustible wellspring of political licitness, namely, the idea that literature and its academic study are a) deprived of clearly defined referents b) the discursive extensions of market paradigms. Lévi-Strauss also introduces several of the perennial entries in the discipline's critical lexicon (“floating signifier” for instance; for what it is worth, my search engine lists about 7,000 hits for the term on pages and files published online in 2020 alone). Whatever the status Marcel Mauss's classic essay has in neighboring disciplines, I know of *not one work of literary theory* in which *The Gift* is discussed in terms other than those proposed by Lévi-Strauss or by those among Lévi-Strauss's readers who came to define the gilded age of literary theory from the mid-20th century onwards (Jacques Derrida, Jacques Lacan, Jean Baudrillard, such proponents of mid-century mysticism as Georges Bataille and Maurice Blanchot, as well as a host of minor Lévi-Straussians).
- 4 The opaque critical shroud surrounding *The Gift* is interesting in itself, for Lévi-Strauss's *Introduction*, despite its signal importance for Lévi-Strauss's own work, has long been disparaged as, precisely, an introduction to Marcel Mauss, especially by those who count themselves as followers of Mauss's socialist and anti-utilitarian conception of the social sciences. Cloaked in Lévi-Strauss's own scientist anthropology of gift-giving societies, some of Mauss's most profound and also most polemical insights were emptied of their utopian content. Born out of his complementary involvement with ethnology, socialist activism and cooperativism between 1920 and 1925 (Dzimira 2007), *The Gift* was admitted to literary theory's pantheon of unread classics under the tacit condition that it be stripped of its originary relationship with that other “total social fact,” international socialism.⁵
- 5 I return to Mauss by way of Lévi-Strauss in order to pursue two distinct lines of inquiry, hoping they will be mutually enlightening. The first line strips away a layer of theoretical discourse from a primary text which has continued to grow in stature among activists and non-academic readers. I discuss Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* in order to show that such a revision is productive for the humanities and that it foregrounds some of the fundamental features of this canonical text. The second line of inquiry, which I pursue much more loosely, and also somewhat more polemically, tries to understand why and how this supplementary layer of critical discourse served as an

ideological lubricant which made some of Mauss's essential theses amenable to the needs of the emerging neoliberal-capitalist university. I want to show what the intercession of Lévi-Strauss's concepts between Mauss and several generations of literary scholars *made possible* in the context of the great transformations of the past half century. I propose, in other words, a utilitarian, teleological reading of one of the founding documents of anti-utilitarianism.

2. Giving, Receiving, Returning

- 6 Several anarchist and, to a lesser degree, socialist traditions have long sought to explain discourses that are nominally *non-official* and effectively informal, such as hearsay, rumor, and gossip, in terms of their usefulness as weapons of resistance to social domination. These weapons are taken to be symbolic: they enable the vulnerable to express their opposition to social domination and exploitation while affording them the anonymity and security necessary to do so. Hearsay, rumor, and gossip, because they are treated as authorless forms of political discourse, enable vulnerable political actors to participate in the contestation of a political order without having to endanger their natural personhood. Non-official discourse is hence efficient when it both successfully undermines a contested political order *and* shields vulnerable political actors from the probable negative consequences of their political engagement (Scott 278-279).
- 7 In practical terms, or in terms of practical political strategy, the weakness of this conception lies in the fact that any participant who relays non-official, authorless discourse on to the next participant may retroactively be designated as its author, even though he or she has merely acted as an intermediary. From the moment non-official discourse circulates widely in a communicative setting (or goes "viral"), the security it affords is dependent on *trust*: non-official discourse must be passed on to those only who can be reasonably expected to treat it as such and guarantee the anonymity of their sources (that is, in effect, of all other intermediaries). The more vulnerable the giver, the riskier the act of relaying gossip and thus the higher the value of trust in the decision either to give or not to give information on to the next intermediary.⁶ However, in order to understand how trust functions as a condition of possibility in the propagation of non-official discourse, the more so in situations of social vulnerability in which trust is necessary but hard to guarantee, it is helpful to draw on a paradigm which has attributed considerable importance to trust, mutuality, and responsibility in the circulation of material and symbolic goods: Marcel Mauss's theorization of gift-giving practices.
- 8 In the opening sentence of *The Gift*, Mauss indicates that he draws on more than a century of ethnographic research, which had long considered gift-giving as a favored theme. Mauss was not greatly innovative in his choice of subject matter. His groundbreaking innovation resided in two more or less implicit, at times antithetical questions he sought to answer jointly in the course of his essay. The first concerns gifting as such: Can the pattern of giving, receiving, and repaying gifts which ethnographers had observed in the Pacific Islands be considered to be universal or universalizable (and if not, why not)? The second question, which Mauss raises insistently, but almost always implicitly, concerns anthropological methodology: Can a thesis (for instance: "something about gifting is universal") be phrased in such a way as

to make sense for the societies it describes (e.g. the indigenous peoples of the Pacific Northwest) and for the society this same thesis is addressed to (e.g. the French Third Republic)? Taken as a whole, these two questions raise a third one, which is synthetic: Is there a similarity between the exchange of material gifts (commodities) and the exchange of ideas (symbolic goods)? Or, to put it differently: What are the conditions under which ideas may circulate like gifts? This, at least, is the logic implied in Mauss's two introductory questions: "*What rule of legality and self-interest, in societies of a backward or archaic type, compels the gift that has been received to be obligatorily reciprocated? What power resides in the object given that causes its recipient to pay it back?*" (4, italics in original). The first sentence phrases Mauss's question in terms familiar to scholars of the French Third Republic: Mauss invokes a legally literate, progressive *homo oeconomicus* who is exclusively devoted to the pursuit of his or her self-interest. The second sentence phrases the same question in terms wholly inadmissible to these same scholars; in the French Third Republic, no compelling power resides "in" objects, although Mauss suggests that this may well be the case in "archaic" societies. In other words, he presents a classic⁷, yet very early formulation of a crucial methodological problem in the social sciences: How can theorization avoid attributing to its object such properties that, in fact, belong to the instruments of theorization itself? Mauss eludes the answer by presenting two incompatible formulations of the same problem: one is nominally rational-scientific, the other nominally pre-theoretical and indigenous.

- 9 Lévi-Strauss's *Introduction* has done much to cement the notion that Mauss had fallen prey to "magical or affective notions" (Lévi-Strauss 49) and that the "power" that resides in objects given and received—a power Mauss called the "*hau*"—was Mauss's own desperate attempt at a rationalization of theoretical contradictions that had arisen in the course of his research:

In this essay, Mauss seems—rightly—to be controlled by a logical certainty, namely, that exchange is the common denominator of a large number of apparently heterogeneous social activities. But exchange is not something he can perceive on the level of the facts. Empirical observation finds not exchange, but only, as Mauss himself says, 'three obligations: giving, receiving, returning.' So the whole theory calls for the existence of a structure, only fragments of which are delivered by experience—just its scattered members, or rather its elements. If exchange is necessary, but not given, then it must be constructed. How? By applying to the isolated parts which are the only present elements, a source of energy which can synthesize them. (Lévi-Strauss 45-46)

- 10 Because in Lévi-Strauss's account Mauss knew that indigenous peoples did not have a general (or even "structural") understanding of the practice of gift-giving and that they mystified the effective *obligation* to return gifts as a series of isolated acts of *generosity*, he had to "add to the mixture an additional quantity which gives him the illusion of squaring his account. This quantity is *hau*" (47). Lévi-Strauss then explains that *hau* can "obviously not" (46) be a physical property of the exchanged goods, and that we hence

find ourselves faced with an alternative: either the property [*hau*] is nothing other than the act of exchange itself as represented in indigenous thinking, in which case we are going round in a circle, or else it is a power of a different nature, in which case the act of exchange becomes, in relation to this power, a secondary phenomenon.

The only way to avoid the dilemma would have been to perceive that the primary, fundamental phenomenon is exchange itself, which gets split up into discrete operations in social life; the mistake was to take the discrete operations for the basic phenomenon (47).

- 11 Whether Mauss's translation of *hau* as "power" is adequate is entirely beside the point here⁸, yet Lévi-Strauss's crucial operation of subsuming "the three obligations: giving, receiving, returning" under the general phenomenon of "exchange" (45) has two major consequences. Firstly, it strips gift-giving practices of their subjective ethical and epistemological dimensions, and empties the discrete acts of "giving, receiving, returning" of the contingent moral, phronetic operations that make them possible (such as assessing whether someone can be trusted with returning a gift, or assessing whether he will be able and willing to accept it in the first place, given the fact that he will be expected to return a gift of an at least equal value, etc.). Secondly, Lévi-Strauss replaces what we may call Mauss's *reasonable choice competitors* with *rational choice individualists* and naturalizes a market paradigm in the place of a non-rationalistic, albeit competitive gift-economy system.⁹
- 12 This last point can briefly be explained by using the example of a simplified *prisoner's dilemma situation*.¹⁰ In a theoretical setting where two participants can either "split" or "steal" a payoff with the result of either a) an equal division of the payoff in the case of both participants "splitting" or b) a single winner of the total payoff in the case of one of the participants "stealing" and the other "splitting" or c) no payoff at all in the case of both participants "stealing," no single choice (each of the actors either "splitting" or "stealing") maximizes the chance of winning either a part or the whole of the payoff; all options are "rationally" equal, and equally uncertain: participants have no reason to assume that their opponent will want to avoid a double "steal," nor have they any reason to maximize the chance of a "split." "Splitting" is not incentivized. This is true both as an axiom in game-theory and in a socio-economic theory (that is, in capitalism as an economic and anthropological model) in which all *homines oeconomici* are expected to choose the option that maximizes their own individual utility; as no single choice is rationally superior to any other, the value of self-interested rationality is paradoxically nil in this specific situation¹¹. This is not true, however, in the context of a Maussian society. Here, ostensible self-interest is tabooed. In this situation, both actors stand under the social obligation to attribute to one another a propensity to act *generously*. In this situation, it is reasonable and socially expected to attribute to one another the willingness to "split" and to behave accordingly, be it in a game setting or in actual gifting situations. It is precisely because all participants expect all others *not* to behave as rational-choice individualists that the situation in which there are no winners at all can be avoided. The social imaginary of gift-giving societies hence maximizes the chances of winning the payoff both individually (always half of the payoff as long as the taboo of self-interest is upheld) and collectively (always all of the payoff as long as the taboo of self-interest is upheld); such a social imaginary, including its structuring taboo, effectively has the same outcomes as other schemes prevalent in game theory and economics, notably *superrationality* (in which an actor assumes that he and all other actors have perfect rationality and will hence cooperate and mutualize the payoff; in fact, as long as the taboo is strictly upheld and known to all participants, attributing generosity to all other actors is a superrational position).¹² The fact that "generosity" is also profitable for all actors involved and that it hence maximizes the *utility of generosity* for the community (as it guarantees that the total payoff will be won, even though it is shared among two participants) invalidates neither the model's consistency nor its ethical import. After all, the egoistical pursuit of material interests by rational economic actors was believed to profit not only individuals, but the

capitalist *community* too¹³—yet, beyond the added benefit of a more equal distribution of the payoff among participants, only a Maussian model ensures that a payoff is won *at all*. In such a model, the ritualistic opposition of egoism and altruism is suspended as long as the community upholds the threefold injunction to give, to receive, and to return, as well as its moral adjunct: the tabooing of ostensible self-interest.¹⁴

- 13 To conclude this first reading, let us briefly take up again Mauss's two mutually exclusive formulations of the obligation to reciprocate gifts as both a "rule of legality and self-interest" and a power that "resides in objects" (Mauss 4). While Lévi-Strauss deduces a generalized economic market ("exchange") from the need "for the existence of a structure," a market deduced, in other words, from the need for a "theory" (Lévi-Strauss 45-46), one may reverse the proposition and retort conversely and simultaneously—and for the sake of methodological reflexivity only—that any need "for the existence of a structure" or a "theory" may equally well be the result of a generalized economic market. In other words, if the need for theoretical coherence leads to the discovery of a "market" in the place of the three obligations of "giving, receiving, returning," one may wish to question the relationship such theorizations have to the market in the first place and, hypothetically, dispense with both, as the population studied by Mauss quite apparently did. This, it seems to me, is precisely the sense of Mauss's contradictory introductory questions; his seemingly "mystified" belief in the existence of a "*hau*" is, in fact, an economic and methodological argument, rather than an anthropological one: the indigenous concept of "*hau*" is not only an occasion for a theoretical description, but also for a simultaneous *materialist* critique of this (and possibly every) act of theorization itself. There should indeed be no reason to take *both* of Mauss's questions other than at face value, and in fact they are both true at the same time as long as we read Mauss's essay as a radical experiment in ethnological reflexivity. Both the "self-interest" thesis and the "power in objects" thesis can be true simultaneously: for this, we must admit that Mauss was willing to refrain from theorizing social actions if and when this theorization simultaneously led to the introduction of a capitalist paradigm in place of the gift-giving practices he had observed.
- 14 Hence, a thesis (for instance: "something about gifting is universal") *can* be phrased in such a way as to make sense of the societies it describes (the indigenous peoples of the Pacific Northwest) and make sense for the society this same thesis is addressed to (the French Third Republic). To do so, Mauss points to the fact that the capitalist economy and gift-giving practices are not mutually exclusive. In fact, both capitalist exploitation and gift-giving may coexist in one and the same social setting.

3. A Maussian Theory of Gossip

- 15 This superposition,¹⁵ rather than mere opposition of competing economic systems, seems to me to be an essential feature of literary discourse, or at least of a significant portion of it—a blanket statement which has to be licit in a discipline which, after all, has never been able to function without instituting some kind of grand interpretative scheme (floating signifiers, dialogism, rhizomes and the like). I wish to argue in the following that the inclusion of informal discourse such as hear-say, rumor, and gossip in novelistic discourse fundamentally alters the way we should go about producing commentary on literature. *The Grapes of Wrath* is, understandably, a prime exhibit piece

for this argument, as the novel is teeming with informal discourse: to put it somewhat bluntly, the novel is about migrants whispering to one another—and to one another only—where to find food, a job, a shelter, and a community; to put it even more bluntly, this is a novel about migrants whispering to one another how to identify other migrants, and how to survive together.

- 16 In its eponymous second chapter, *The Grapes of Wrath* outlines the migrants' own conception of the Maussian "power in objects" and, in passing, declares that capitalism, rather than gift-giving, is derived from "indigenous" thinking:

The driver said, 'Fellow was telling me the bank gets orders from the East. The orders were, "Make the land show profit or we'll close you up."'

'But where does it stop? Who can we shoot? I don't aim to starve to death before I kill a man that's starving me.'

'I don't know. Maybe there's nobody to shoot. Maybe the thing isn't men at all. Maybe, like I said, the property's doing it. Anyway I told you my orders.' (Steinbeck 250, my italics)

- 17 Capitalist exploitation has its own familiar train of "mystifications": fetishized property—property which is abstracted from its conditions of production and use—informs the migrant's most concrete experience of what we take to be actors in "a market," in other words, what economic agency is. The novel describes how the migrants end up producing a critique of fetishized capital (capitalism's own *hau*) and become able to identify individuals, rather than "things," as the source of power and domination—the "owners" (219). Simultaneously, the novel describes an alternative economy, in which the identification and naming of individual gifters and gossipers is tabooed—although, again, the term economy is not quite suited here, as the migrants do not perceive the discrete acts of giving, receiving, and returning as moments in a series that would make up a formal market or economic system (as, more generally, "Merchandising was a secret to them" [313]). Indeed, the novel depicts how the migrants establish and maintain a relatively informal system of "marketless" gift-giving practices. The migrants give, receive, and return commodities and, most importantly, symbolic goods: gossip, reliable and unreliable information, opinions, warnings, interpretations of their socio-economic situation, hypotheses as to how to reclaim a livelihood and a dignity. We are hence faced with a situation which reverses Lévi-Strauss's comments on Mauss: the "market," rather than the gift-giving paradigm, is dependent on a mystification (attributing power to commodities, rather than to those who profit from their production, expropriation, and commercialization).

- 18 In fact, Steinbeck outlines innumerable situations in which informal discourse functions as a standard case of gift-giving. These examples of "gossiping as gifting" never coalesce into a theory; yet if the migrants are perceived by local populations as "degenerates" precisely because they have "no sense of property rights" (510), the novel nevertheless sketches out a very complex system of tacit rules under which commodities and information may circulate. Most significantly, rumors about available jobs structure the plot and map out a possible trail for the migrants: "In the camps the word would come whispering, There's work at Shafter. And the cars would be loaded in the night, the highways crowded" (460). The migrants assess whether gossip can be trusted ("They said that? Seem like a fella that knowed? Not jus' blowin' off?" [313]) and whether gossip can be trusted as gossip, that is, as a discourse predicated on trust, anonymity, and the effective existence of a community among which informal discourse may circulate safely. This includes various heuristics for weighing the

trustworthiness of local belonging against the trustworthiness of a common socio-economic situation¹⁶ (do we share “almost a kin bond” [387] because we are dependent on trusting one another?). Assessing whether and how one belongs to a communicative situation in which the *truthfulness* of discourse is inextricably tied up with the *trustworthiness* of those on which its transmission depends.

- 19 In the novel, gifting and gossiping are never made explicit as binding norms of reciprocity. Charity is tabooed by the migrants (“it makes a burn that don’t come out” [546]) in the same terms and for the same reasons as Mauss does: “Charity is still wounding for him who has accepted it” (Mauss 83). The ability to *forget* that one has received symbolic or material gifts is necessary for the upholding of shared community practices: returning a piece of information after a sufficient lapse of time can, in turn, be perceived as an isolated act of generosity and as a common commitment against self-interest, whereas charity (“if you ever took it, you don’t forget it”¹⁷) institutes a system of obligatory and above all *explicit* reciprocity. For the migrants in Steinbeck’s novel, the obligation of reciprocation must imperatively remain tacit and cloaked in the garb of generosity; a single exception in the course of the novel makes the obligation explicit, yet only to better reaffirm the taboo:

‘We’re proud to help,’ said Wilson.

‘We’re beholden to you,’ said Pa.

‘There’s no beholden in a time of dying,’ said Wilson, and Sairy echoed him, ‘Never no beholden.’

Al said, ‘I’ll fix your car—me an’ Tom will.’ And Al looked proud that he could return the family’s obligation.

‘We could use some help.’ Wilson admitted the retiring of the obligation. (357)

- 20 The surplus-value created by the tabooed obligation to reciprocate material and symbolic gifting is the effective survival of the gifting community itself: gossiping and gifting are necessary in order to uphold the efficient fiction of spontaneous generosity and to prohibit self-interested behavior within the migrant community.
- 21 On the narratological level, the sixteen intercalary chapters in *The Grapes of Wrath* imply an alternative economy of symbolic and material gifting, receiving, and returning which is juxtaposed with the remainder of Steinbeck’s more conventional plot-driven chapters. The intercalary chapters revolve around generalized characters and voices, and wholly reject free indirect discourse: there simply is no narrative mediation of the direct speech of characters. As such, these intercalary chapters assemble authorless, anonymous statements that are presented as having long circulated among the migrants and which now make up the content of a symbolic transaction between the diegetic reality and the reader. We may think of this symbolic transaction as the general form of a particular case, a seldom commented ritual opposition which structures *The Grapes of Wrath*, and we can do so in order to understand how such a symbolic transaction might be apprehended as a problem for literary criticism. Indeed, orality is contrasted with writing throughout the novel: the Joads repeatedly express how writing is tied up with the experience of dispossession and humiliation (“[Pa] don’t even like word writin’. Kinda scares ’im, I guess. Ever’ time Pa seen writin’, somebody took somepin away from ’im.” [266]), while orality remains the exclusive medium of gossiping and symbolic gifting. Orality is, significantly, also the vector of religious discourse. During a dialogue on the political implications of gaining literacy, the preacher Jim Casy insists that spoken words become equal to gifted commodities and are seamlessly integrated into a network of reciprocal acts of

generosity: “I never took no collections when I was preachin’ out here to folks... I took a pair of pants when mine was wore out, an’ a ol’ pair a shoes when I was walkin’ through to the groun’” [268]. Gossiping and gifting both belong in the same informal system of “marketless” gift-giving practices; words and commodities are nominally equivalent and mutually exchangeable, yet only as long as the community which makes such exchanges possible is maintained.¹⁸

- 22 By contrast, the “han’bills” advertising work, and more generally *writing* in general, are inflationary: they are inflationary because they originate from outside the marketless society established by the migrants, they are inflationary because their unreliability (or their reliability as deceitful discourse) generates multiple, equally inadequate interpretations, and they are inflationary because they superimpose a generalized market paradigm and the generation of capital on a marketless system which depends on trust and the survival of a community. The duplicity of hand-bills can be turned into capital: it is precisely *because* the written word is not worth anything, because it cannot be *trusted*¹⁹, and thus cannot be reliably exchanged against essential commodities (food and shelter), that writing can generate capital.
- 23 Let us finally return to Mauss’s speculative question: what are the conditions under which ideas may circulate like gifts? There is no sharp break in the gift-giving practices described by Steinbeck (under the guise of either gossiping or material gifting) that separates symbolic from material goods. Both may be mutually exchanged against one another, both are predicated on securing a reasonable degree of trust between giver and receiver, both taboo explicit and compulsory reciprocation (even though reciprocation *is*, in effect, compulsory), both generate the survival of the community as a surplus-value: ideas, symbolic goods, and gossip may circulate like gifts if and only if they are treated as such.
- 24 We can hence rephrase Mauss’s synthetic question as a set of more explicitly political and methodological ones: does scientific research entail obligations towards those from whom we have received symbolic goods? Does receiving symbolic goods entail their compulsory reciprocation? And if so, how can we ascertain that those symbolic goods that are returned as symbolic goods will not be excluded from the “marketless” economy they originate from? How can we ascertain that our counter gifts will not destroy the marketless economy they originate from and are addressed to?

4. Taking From the Rich, Giving to the Poor. An Ethics of Gossiping

It is strange that we do not yet have a logical theory of the duties of the reader, nor a theory of the rights of the author.²⁰

Novalis, *Notes for a Romantic Encyclopedia*

- 25 These questions are both rather technical and genuinely prosaic. I would like to suggest that the ethical and epistemological dimensions of gossiping and gift-giving practices can serve as general signposts for a possible literary theory that would take its role as a participant in a material and symbolic economy seriously. Let me restate the fundamentals once more: Maussian trust implies that a symbolic good received (a word or a novel, for instance) will elicit a counter gift of an at least equal value, and that the implicit social imaginary that supports this obligation must be preserved. In turn, the survival of the *community of persons* that is engaged in this symbolic exchange is

secured. Of course, the migrants in *The Grapes of Wrath* are fictional, so that the survival of a novelistic life-world can only be taken to be metaphorical; however, it should be the burden of the literary critic to demonstrate, if he or she is so inclined, that the migrants Steinbeck wrote *about* were as fictional as the Joads, that the Dust Bowl referred to in the novel is not the Dust Bowl that swept across the American and Canadian prairies during the 1930s, or that literary characters may never refer to either persons, nor citizens, nor people, nor humans (after all, two of the most prominent literary theorists of the twentieth century, Paul de Man and Hans Robert Jauß, frequently resorted to such arguments, partly so in their scholarly works). Alternatively, we may prefer to deduct binding interpretative norms, a “theory of the duties of the reader” (Novalis 99), from the way Steinbeck construes symbolic exchange as a matter of textual interpretation (or more generally as a mode of writing and reading). For instance, we may declare ourselves accountable to the survival of the persons Steinbeck’s novel is *about*.

- 26 Yet the “aboutness” of literature (its conventional referentiality) is almost always the occasion for ritualistic demonstrations of critical virtuosity: scholastic legitimacy is all too often dependent on the devaluation of practical ends, the liquidation of historical context, and, most importantly, the repudiation of the essentially conventional nature of linguistic meaning in literature (conventionality as distinct from, yet compatible with, arbitrariness: “conventional” because users agree tacitly or explicitly upon a lexical item’s meaning, such as “if,” or “bread,” or “*hau*”²¹). The scholastic lector “is interested in texts, and in theories, methods and concepts that they convey, not in order to do something with them, not to bring them, as useful, perfectible instruments, into a practical use, but so as to gloss them, by relating them to other texts” (Bourdieu 2000, 62). It should not be so. By pointing out the relationship between Lévi-Strauss’s grandiose extension of market paradigms and the need for totalizations in the capitalist system, we can arguably dispense with such theoretical crutches (and political fig leaves) as the “floating signifier” and replace it with what, in Mauss’s account, “*hau*” stands for²²: the obligation to give gifts, to receive gifts, to return gifts, to return gifts of an at least equal value, to ascertain the trustworthiness of the recipient of one’s gift, to guarantee her anonymity so as to secure her protection and survival, to let sufficient time between gift and counter-gift elapse so as to maintain the fiction of generalized generosity, and finally to taboo both the compulsory nature of counter-gifting and the explicit evaluation of a gift’s economic value (to put it differently, gift and counter-gift must never be perceived as either debt or credit, even when predicated on *credo*, or trust). The originary “empty” or “floating” signifier—Lévi-Strauss’s “*hau*”—turns out to be “too full” and solidly anchored in concrete social practices.
- 27 The crucial point for literary theory is the following: as a matter of principle, symbolic and material goods are mutually giftable and counter-giftable; our critical practice is a symbolic practice that may be part of such a gifting circuit; consequently, one may never assume a break between symbolic practices and their material referents, although such a break *may* occur.
- 28 Let me elucidate this claim from another angle. Gifting and the survival of the gifting community are predicated on trust; trust, in turn, is predicated on a) the obligation to foster the community through putatively disinterested gifting and b) the careful, yet always tacit assessment of the giftee’s ability to receive and return a gift. This

assessment can be described as a set of questions. Will the person to whom I give a commodity or symbolic good be able to accept this gift as a gift, and hence to return a gift of an at least equal value? Will the giftee be *rich enough* to fulfill the obligation of reciprocation and, in turn, become a countergifter? I suggest that such wagers are at the core of literary interpretation. It is precisely because I cannot be certain that the intended meaning will match the meaning received that I have to trust the conventional nature of linguistic meaning and, just as importantly, consider the socio-economic and linguistic situation of those I communicate with—be it in academic criticism, in the Pacific Islands, or in the diegetic world of *The Grapes of Wrath*. Every exchange of symbolic goods (gossip, literature, an utterance, its meaning) is predicated on the tacit, probabilistic, and materialist assessment that it will be understood in such a way that its reception will not damage the possibility of communication itself (including its return as a countergift), nor its corollary, the survival of the community of those who participate in literary communication—professional and non-professional readers alike. Reading literary discourse “against the grain,” in other words, is not a “negotiation”²³ (or a creative-destructive “business”) with the pitfalls of language itself, although it is often couched in such terms, but rather a “negotiation” with (or more simply a *negation* of) the fact that the reception and production of literary meaning are socially constituted acts.

- 29 The problem, of course, becomes urgent when we consider that a significant portion of canonical literature of the nineteenth and twentieth century (*The Grapes of Wrath*, *The American*, practically all of Faulkner, practically all of Woolf, practically all of the African-American canon) stages the unequal distribution of linguistic resources among writers, diegetic characters, readers, and socio-historical referents, and that this unequal distribution is often illustrated by the use of informal discourse. The more unequal the distribution of linguistic resources (including the distribution of “background assumptions” we call into play in order to assess conventional meaning [Searle 80]) among readers, diegetic characters, authors, and referents, the more uncertain and riskier the exchange and interpretation of literary discourse becomes: the likelihood of producing an adequate reading (on which even the most disheveled “misreading” always remains woefully dependent), that is, the likelihood of receiving a meaning *approximately* as it was intended, is predicated on the *approximate* adequation, or alternatively *correct* appreciation, of all linguistic, political, socio-economic resources involved.²⁴ In Maussian terms, it is riskier to give to the poor, and riskier for a critic to speak to (and read) those who do not hold a *doctorate*, yet only as long as one holds on to the idea that linguistic meaning is conventional precisely because its conventionality fulfills a social function, that is, that the conventional nature of language is in itself meaningful socially. From the moment this conventionality is negated, literary theory gains one of the prime justifications for the quasi-industrial production of commentary; by the same token, however, it loses both its trustworthiness and truthfulness as a social and political act. Our own “critical investments in literature” (to use another typical and symptomatic phrase of our current jargon) are contingent on our belief in our ability to receive and reciprocate symbolic goods. Still, such wagers are made, and they are made every time literary discourse is read in the hope of understanding its conventional meaning, and every time literary discourse is written in the hope of being understood conventionally.

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NOTES

1. For a discussion of the authoritarian history of liberalism, see: Chamayou.
2. Bruno Amable and Stefano Palombarini, among many others, have noted the importance of these Schumpeterian themes for the current formation of entrepreneurship and intellectuality alike, as well as for the way both envision social change (Amable, Palombarini, 161-187).
3. First published as *Essai sur le don* in *L’Année sociologique* in 1925.
4. First published as *Introduction à l’Œuvre de Marcel Mauss* in 1950.
5. The political writings of Marcel Mauss shed light on the relationship between the development of *The Gift*, the Russian Revolution, the rise of Fascism, and the great hopes Mauss laid in democratic, humanist socialism (Mauss, *Écrits politiques* 249-721).
6. This is, of course, also a feature of credit transactions in general. Simmel is particularly interesting on this subject in: Simmel 484-486.
7. In the context of his theory of practice, Pierre Bourdieu’s reading of Mauss presents a nearly exhaustive account of these epistemological problems (Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice* 98-111).
8. Sahlins explains his translation of *hau* as “yield”; 139-150.
9. Becker discusses altruistic behavior as rational behavior; 282-294.
10. Godbout has discussed much more complex prisoner dilemmas with respect to the anthropology of gift-giving. I here use a simpler model in order to highlight the paradoxes of Lévi-Strauss’s reading of *The Gift*; Godbout 286-299.
11. So much so, in fact, that the prohibition of cartels, whose formation would be a rational response to such a situation, has to be devolved to other, non-economic social institutions (legal frameworks, for instance).
12. See Hofstadter’s classic essay; 737-755.
13. Generally, see: Hirschman.
14. See also, more generally: Wiener 155-160.
15. Maussian scholarship frequently insists on the coexistence of market economics and gift-giving practices in the societies it studies, including Western hypermodern societies. Generally, see: Weber 34-38, 54.
16. For instance: “I knowed a fella from California. He didn’t talk like us. You’d of knowed he come from some far-off place jus’ the way he talked. But he says they’s too

many folks lookin' for work right there now. An' he says the folks that pick the fruit live in dirty ol' camps an' don't hardly get enough to eat" (Steinbeck 306).

17. "If a body's every took charity, it makes a burn that don't come out. This ain't charity, but if you ever took it, you don't forget it" (Steinbeck 547).

18. In general, literature on gossiping as a form of gifting is scarce and dated. Niko Besnier very briefly mentions Maussian gifting as a possible analytic paradigm of gossiping, and Bailey first pointed out the relation between the micropolitics of reputation and gift-giving practices (Besnier 118-119; Bailey).

19. The ethical, economic, and religious mutations of the Latin *credo* have long been noted by linguists (Benveniste 138-142).

20. My translation. David W. Wood's otherwise excellent translation of Novalis's *Notes for a Romantic Encyclopedia* is somewhat unclear in this specific instance (Novalis 99).

21. Generally, see Davidson's discussion of conventional and literal meaning in: Davidson 157-174.

22. Generally, for Lévi-Strauss's interpretation of "*hau*" as a "floating signifier" see: Schrift 1-22.

23. A symptomatic phrase in the critical jargon: we "negotiate," from the Latin "*negotium*": "not-contemplation" and "not-philosophy;" we "do business" with texts instead. Incidentally, the earliest philological journal in the United States, published by the American Philological Association from 1869 onwards, was entitled *Transactions* (Turner 278-279).

24. As early as 1984, Jacques Bouveresse showed how constitutive this rejection of the conventionality of literary and philosophical language had been for the ascent of theorists like Derrida, Deleuze, and Foucault (Bouveresse 120-133).

ABSTRACTS

This essay discusses gift-giving and gossiping in a canonical American novel (John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, 1939) by way of the two texts which sealed the fate of dominant literary scholarship after WWII: Marcel Mauss's essay *The Gift* and Claude Lévi-Strauss's *Introduction to the Work of Marcel Mauss*. Steinbeck's use of informal discourse and Marcel Mauss's descriptions of tacit compulsory reciprocation present the opportunity to dispute central assumptions in literary theory that pertain to literary meaning, interpretation, and referentiality. This essay argues that literary language is conventional precisely because its conventionality fulfills a social function; the conventional nature of literary language is in itself meaningful socially. This, in turn, suggests that the interpretation of literary texts remains dependent on a correct understanding of the material and symbolic economies they participate in.

INDEX

Keywords: gifting, gift economy, gossip, reciprocity, *Grapes of Wrath*

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